

CONNECTING GENERATIONS

A GUIDANCE NOTE ON INCLUSIVE
INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUE

By Erike Tanghøj



Swedish Dialogue Institute
for the Middle East and North Africa



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Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Foreword | 4 |
| Executive summary | 6 |
| About the guidance note | 8 |
| Why a guidance note on intergenerational dialogue? | 8 |
| Purpose and content | 9 |
| Intergenerational dialogue for peace, security, and sustainable development | 10 |
| What constitutes a generation? | 10 |
| Generations and age-based power structures | 11 |
| What is intergenerational dialogue? | 13 |
| Intergenerational dialogue as a cornerstone to inclusive peace, security, and sustainable development | 14 |
| Generational identities and conflict dynamics | 14 |
| The generational salience of certain societal issues | 16 |
| Intergenerational dialogue to unlock lasting solutions | 18 |
| Intergenerational dialogue in practice | 19 |
| Key considerations and promising practices for intergenerational dialogue | 21 |
| Consideration 1: Incentives and costs related to participation | 22 |
| Consideration 2: Age-based needs and provisions | 24 |
| Consideration 3: Generational perspectives of the dialogue topic | 26 |
| Consideration 4: Code of conduct | 28 |
| Consideration 5: Awareness (about age-based power dynamics) | 30 |
| Consideration 6: Active listening | 32 |
| Consideration 7: Human connection | 34 |
| Consideration 8: Past, present, and future | 36 |
| Consideration 9: "Inbetweener" | 38 |
| Consideration 10: Formal versus informal dialogue settings | 40 |
| Consideration 11: Dialogue process versus one-off events | 42 |
| Case study: A multistakeholder intergenerational dialogue | 44 |
| Guiding principles | 50 |
| Acknowledgements | 53 |
| About the Swedish Dialogue Institute for Middle East and North Africa | 54 |
| About the Folke Bernadotte Academy | 54 |

Foreword

Dialogue between people from different walks of life is at the core of *the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa's* mandate. Inclusive dialogues, regardless of whether they are intercultural, interreligious, or intergenerational, play a pivotal role in achieving peace, security, and sustainable development across regions and societies. Mutual understanding through an open exchange of ideas, information, and experiences underpins effective and representative policymaking – ensuring a sustainable present and future.

Intergenerational relations hold significant value in our lives. They enhance emotional well-being and social integration, provide a sense of belonging, and ensure the transfer of invaluable knowledge, benefiting people of all ages. Dialogue across generations is vital for establishing and maintaining these ties by preserving traditions, stories, and history within families and the broader community. **As such, intergenerational dialogue instils a sense of connection to the past, present, and future, thus fortifying our collective sense of belonging and social cohesion.**

Addressing humanity's most pressing challenges demands the engagement of all generations as younger and older people contribute unique knowledge, experience, and skills. Together, they offer diverse perspectives, unlocking lasting solutions. **Excluding any generation from problem-solving and decision-making processes risks perpetuating intergenerational injustice, potentially sowing seeds of resentment, inequality, and social unrest.**

Inclusive dialogues across generations, in which people of different ages are valued and heard, can serve as a powerful tool in bringing an array of critical issues to light, from social justice and human rights to sustainable development, climate change, and matters of peace and security. Through an inclusive approach, these dialogues dismantle stereotypes, correct misconceptions, and foster a shared sense of purpose. By appreciating the distinctive viewpoints and contributions of each generation, we can chart a course to a more just and harmonious future.

Regrettably, despite constituting a significant portion of the global population, younger generations often find themselves excluded from decision-making processes in matters that significantly impact their lives. Their voices, needs, priorities, and aspirations are often overlooked, creating policy and governance imbalances in many aspects of their lives. In addition to constituting a fundamental matter of rights, it is also a salient matter of peace and security. Some groups of youth who face systematic, sometimes oppressive, exclusion may resort to drastic measures to have their voices heard. These measures may include embarking on perilous journeys in search of a better life or, in extreme cases, because of compound detrimental conditions, resorting to violence.

Intergenerational dialogues, based on active listening and mutual respect, can mitigate the risk of marginalisation and alienation and play a role in preventing conflict. By acknowledging grievances and incorporating diverse perspectives, an intergenerational approach cultivates resilient relationships. It reinforces social cohesion by nurturing mutual understanding, empathy, and respect across age groups. As a result, the sense of belonging and collective responsibility for community well-being is strengthened, reducing potential conflicts and divisions.

An intergenerational approach to dialogue also encourages a forward-looking vision that transcends the present. This approach ensures that decisions and policies are made with the enduring well-being of future generations in mind, instilling a sense of continuity and stewardship for our planet and societies.

Charlotta Sparre

Director of the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa

Executive summary

In 2023, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa conducted a participatory process to explore and co-create knowledge on intergenerational dialogue. This process involved roundtable discussions, workshops, meetings, and interviews – engaging with over 200 individuals of diverse backgrounds and experiences. The resulting insights and lessons learnt are consolidated in this guidance note, which complements existing resources by incorporating a generational perspective into established dialogue practices.

Intergenerational dialogue, as defined in this guidance note, is a two- or multi-way communication method rooted in active listening and mutual learning between individuals from different generations. Its primary objective includes fostering mutual understanding of generational perspectives, dispelling stereotypes, building trust and solidarity, exploring solutions to joint challenges, and bridging potential intergenerational gaps and inequalities.

Some of the most pressing issues related to sustainable peace and development require an understanding of perspectives beyond the present, which account for and recognise generational implications. Intergenerational dialogue may serve as a vehicle to achieve such a holistic understanding. Conducting intergenerational dialogue can open communication between generations about the past, present, and future, break conflict dynamics arising from generational differences and gaps, as well as cycles of inherited conflict. Intergenerational solutions stemming from cross-generational dialogue can inform inclusive and representative policy formulation, mitigating the risk of short-sighted decision-making. This, in turn, can contribute to coexistence and increased societal resilience.

Intergenerational dialogues have transformative potential for both younger and older generations. Yet, the conduciveness of these dialogues depends on the context, the topic of discussion, and the unique participant needs and dynamics, to name a few factors. Nevertheless, based on contributors' experiences, several key dialogue considerations emerged as particularly important from an intergenerational standpoint. These encompass understanding participants' motivations and bridging potential age-related disparities in incentives, needs, and aspirations.

Equally crucial is addressing the needs of diverse age groups, ensuring inclusivity and comfort, particularly for children and older people. Recognising and empathising with participants' feelings and perspectives across generations enhances the dialogue's richness. Allowing time for reflections on cultural origins and future aspirations deepens understanding and magnifies the dialogue's impact.

In essence, nurturing genuine connections and providing room for past reminiscences and future aspirations significantly enhance the intergenerational dialogue experience.

Based on the identified key considerations and adherent promising practices, a set of guiding principles have been identified to consider when planning, facilitating, and/or partaking in an intergenerational dialogue. In short, they are:



Consider your own and other parties' incentives (or lack thereof) to meaningfully engage in an intergenerational dialogue.



Give voice to and make age-specific provisions to ensure that the needs of younger and older participants are acknowledged and addressed.



Analyse the dialogue topic from a generational perspective, while keeping intersectionality in mind.



Establish a code of conduct that stipulates how to ensure equal opportunities for representatives of younger and older generations throughout the dialogue.



Become aware of and challenge your own and others' potential age-based biases and prejudices by reflecting on stereotypes associated with different generations.



Encourage and engage in active listening. This not only entails absorbing what is said but includes reflecting back, showing that one has listened and is willing to continue to listen.



Support and seek human connection between parties to foster an open and honest conversation.



Make time and space to "remember the past for the present and future" and to "remember the future".



Make use of inbetweeners to guard the interaction and/or moderate parts of the conversations between participants so that it remains balanced, unbiased, and free from age-based prejudices and master suppression techniques.



Strive towards creating an "informal formal" setting and environment for the dialogue.



Engage in ongoing dialogues with people of different generational identities. (As an organiser, this entails prioritising intergenerational dialogue processes rather than *one-off* events).

About the guidance note

Why a guidance note on intergenerational dialogue?

In recent years, we have seen a growing number of international, regional, and national actors working on matters related to the Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) agenda, bringing together people to engage in “intergenerational dialogues” – often with the objective of increased youth participation. While many of these events have successfully provided young women and men with a space to voice their concerns and offer recommendations to policy- and decision-makers, they did not all constitute de facto intergenerational dialogue.

Instead of two-way conversations aimed at encouraging the exchange of generational perspectives, mutual learning, and increased understanding, people of different ages (contributing to the knowledge-creating process upon which this guidance note is developed) have felt unheard, disrespected, or even accused as the intended dialogue resulted in two separate monologues.

Such practices under the guise of “intergenerational dialogues” are missed opportunities that risk doing more harm than good by fuelling frustrations and widening the gaps between generations. Against this backdrop, and based on recommendations from partners, the Dialogue Institute has recognised the need to better understand what constitutes constructive intergenerational dialogue. Our aim is to provide practical guidance for practitioners in carrying out meaningful intergenerational dialogues for the benefit of people of all ages.

For this purpose, the Dialogue Institute initiated a participatory knowledge-creation process in 2023 to explore questions, such as why we need dialogue across generations and what are its objectives? What makes a dialogue intergenerational, and what are promising practices for making such dialogues conducive, inclusive, and transformative?

The result of this work is summarised in this guidance note. We hope it will clarify what intergenerational dialogue is and what it is not to avoid it becoming yet another buzzword or ill-informed practice used by well-intended actors that may do more harm than good when bringing people of different ages together. With the following guidance note, the Institute underscores its unwavering commitment to dialogue spaces that champion inclusivity, equality, and mutual respect.

Purpose and content

The guidance complements existing resources by providing support in applying a generational perspective to dialogue practices¹. For this purpose, the guidance note provides:

- an overview of what intergenerational dialogue is (and what it is not) and why it is paramount within the scope of peace, security, and sustainable development, and,
- considerations, promising practices, and guiding principles to inspire and support various actors in organising and/or partaking in an inclusive and conducive intergenerational dialogue for both younger and older generations – whether in a large formal setting or informally between two individuals.

The guidance note is primarily based on information, experiences, expertise, and recommendations collected through interviews, surveys, meetings, workshops, and roundtable discussions with diverse people (mainly from the MENA region), spanning generational identities, genders, and areas of expertise. In total, over 200 contributors have provided their insights to develop this guidance note.

In addition, a series of informal, smaller-scale dialogues and larger, more formal exchanges between people of different ages², generational identities, and walks of life took place. These dialogues centred around intergenerational dialogue per se and served as platforms for testing and validating identified promising practices and discovering new ones. These dialogues ultimately enriched the guidance note content with more practical experiences.

While most of those who have contributed to the guidance note development are from the MENA region, the Dialogue Institute is confident that the considerations, promising practices, and guiding principles outlined here can be applied in most contexts or situations and by different actors.

Intergenerational dialogue for peace, security, and sustainable development

What constitutes a generation?

To apply a generational perspective on dialogue, we must understand what a generation is and what shapes its “identity”. A common explanation of what constitutes a generation is: “An identifiable group that shares birth years, age, location, and significant life events at critical developmental stages” (Tolbize, 2008).

In accordance with this, what distinguishes a generation is more than just the similarities of birth years and, consequently, age. Simply put, a generational identity is shaped by age as much as by significant political and historical life events and societal paradigm shifts concurrent with the critical development stages of an individual’s life – such as adolescence.

Such experiences can influence and, to some extent, shape the opinions, beliefs, thoughts, behaviours, actions, and even an individual’s language and cultural expression as they grow up. People who are at a similar critical development stage and who experience the same formative events may establish common reference points that serve as a “connecting tissue”. This, in turn, can make communication and building relationships and empathy among them easier.

“Generations differ in terms of the experiences they have, and the perspectives they have on shared experiences.”

Formative factors can include wars, social transformations and upheavals, financial and humanitarian crises, political paradigm shifts, innovations, technological breakthroughs, etc. On a global scale, examples of such formative events and paradigm shifts that have influenced current older generations include, for example, the development and use of weapons of mass destruction (considered to have changed the world order) and the 1970s oil crisis.

Current younger generations, on the other hand, have been significantly shaped by the technological revolution of the early 2000s. The introduction of social media is often

referred to as a societal paradigm shift, substantially moulding younger generations across the world – and it continues to do so. Climate change and the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) are further examples regarded as key formative factors of the young generations growing up today, and for future generations.

While formative factors bring groups of people together to form a generation, dividing lines between generations are somewhat fluid rather than clear-cut³. Moreover, generational labels that attempt to be universal, such as *Baby Boomers*, *Millennials*, and *Gen Z*, tend to have a Western-centric bias as they fail to take geographical differences into consideration. As generational similarities and differences are never static and may evolve over the course of a lifetime, these labels may also contribute to stereotyping by implying commonalities among and differences between individuals that may not exist. Members of different generations may align as they age.

When adopting a generational approach, it is thus important to consider the limitations of trying to *universally* define and characterise different groups of generations and to use such categorisation as a basis for analysis, policymaking, or operational design. At the same time, there is inherent value in understanding the impact of formative factors on the life trajectory of different age groups. There is societal insight to be gained on demographic trends and shifting public attitudes and behaviours, for instance⁴.

Generations and age-based power structures

Generational belonging is intricately connected to an individual’s access to power. While generational identities can influence individuals’ perspectives and priorities, age can affect their access to power, influence, and decision-making.

Throughout history, gaps in access to power, influence, and decision-making have been an underlying and recurring cause of conflict. In many societies, age has traditionally been and still constitutes a strong factor in determining individual and groups’ wealth, power, and influence. In society, the youngest usually have the least power and influence. As people grow older, they generally gain more ‘say’ about their own life trajectory. In some societies, such influence progressively increases the older you become. In others, passing a certain age may mean you start losing influence and agency again.

Age-based power structures thus play a pivotal role in determining how each generation’s perspectives are represented and prioritised within societies. For instance, concerns and interests of some generations may be overshadowed or disregarded in favour of those who hold more sway – particularly when the generation is still relatively young (or very old). However, as younger generations age, they collectively gain more power and representation and can have their priorities and needs met to a greater extent. Recognising and addressing these evolving and changing power dynamics is essential to ensuring that all generations can influence policies and priorities, regardless of how many years they have lived.

“ **Generational equity requires that stereotypical narratives about young and old alike are changed and that power structures based on age are addressed.** ”

Taken together, generational identity and power structures can contribute to the reinforcement of age-based stereotypes (what we think), prejudices (how we feel), and discrimination (how we act). When some generations hold more power and influence, their perspectives and attitudes about other age groups can shape societal perceptions. This can lead to the perpetuation of stereotypes about the capabilities, attitudes, and contributions of different generations.

Generally, the perceptions of (the right to) power as it relates to age may influence how individuals and generations perceive societal inequities among themselves. Since those who are young now will likely have more influence as they grow older, today's older generations may agree that younger generations have less influence than older generations but disagree on whether this is unjust⁵.

In a similar vein, those who belong to a current older generation may feel that they have had to live through their own early lives where they had less influence, and therefore, so should the generation that is young now.

Generational stereotypes and inequality may cut both/several ways

While older generations often have more power and influence than the young (and the very old), the reverse can also be true. One example is the STEM sector (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), in which older generations lag in education and employment and tend to be stereotypically ascribed epithets such as outdated, unteachable, technologically illiterate, and slow. This illustrates that power dynamics and perceptions of influence can vary significantly across different sectors and contexts, emphasizing the importance of considering generational factors holistically when addressing inequality and opportunity.

What is intergenerational dialogue?

In its most basic sense, a dialogue consists of a conversation between individuals or groups. Unpacking it in the scope of inclusive peace, security, and sustainable development, dialogue is a structured and inclusive conversation based on active listening that aims to increase people's understandings of needs and interest, addressing grievances, and, if desired and feasible, finding mutually acceptable solutions. Taken together with the results of the knowledge-creation process upon which this note is developed, one way of describing intergenerational dialogue is:

Intergenerational dialogue is a two- or multiway communication method grounded in active listening and mutual learning practices between members of different generations, which is meaningful for all parties.

The overarching objective of an intergenerational dialogue includes seeking mutual understanding of generational perspectives and differences, breaking stereotypes and discrimination structures based on age, building trust and empathy across generations, and bridging potential gaps and inequalities between generations.

Intergenerational dialogue can also aim to explore solutions to jointly experienced challenges, problems and/or conflicts and, if feasible and desirable, result in the identification or agreement of (collective) action that benefits both older and younger generations respectively⁶.

A word of caution: be wary of calling youth consultations anything but that

It is imperative to distinguish between intergenerational dialogue and *youth consultations*, as they serve different and distinct purposes. Whereas a youth consultation involves seeking input and feedback exclusively from young people to inform decisions or policies, an intergenerational dialogue involves individuals from different age groups, including younger and older generations, who collectively exchange ideas, address issues, and build understanding. Both activities hold value. However, there is often a misconception, especially within the peace and security sector, that these terms are interchangeable. This confusion risks diluting the essence of dialogue, particularly within the sphere of Youth, Peace, and Security initiatives. We must recognise and acknowledge the differences between consultations, dialogue, and partnerships.

Intergenerational dialogue as a cornerstone to inclusive peace, security, and sustainable development

Below, we explore factors that make intergenerational dialogue essential for achieving inclusive peace, security, and sustainable development.

1. Generational identities and conflict dynamics

Generational identities affect conflicts between family members, working colleagues or groups in society in complex, multifaceted, context-dependent ways, and they are interlinked with other identities (such as gender). In the next section, we will explore some potential links between generational gaps and conflict formation⁷. The term “conflict” herein refers to conflicts in the broadest sense, i.e., spanning the whole spectrum from interpersonal, social, organisational to political and armed conflicts.



Conflicting generational differences and gaps

Conflicting generational differences and gaps are common experiences in our lives. Most people have encountered challenges in trying to communicate with someone significantly younger or older, whether it is a family member or colleague. As discussed above, disparities in cultural expressions, language, behaviours, and preferred communication methods can lead to communication breakdowns and, consequently, misunderstandings. These situations can give rise to interpersonal tensions and even lead to unfair stereotyping, like the portrayal of adolescents as inexperienced and older people as out of touch and resistant to change.

Each generation plays a role in shaping social norms and cultural values. Throughout history, generational differences in beliefs, opinions, values, etc. have catalysed social transformations and progress. Younger generations have often spearheaded the transformation of established norms, such as gender roles, and broken societal taboos, like challenging traditions and beliefs in communities and societies. While, from a progressive standpoint, many of these changes are positive, not all generations have appreciated or embraced them, as they may have felt they disrupted society’s social order.

Consequently, when challenged, members of older generations might feel that their way of life is being undermined and eroded and may be inclined to take counteractive measures. For instance, individuals from older generations in positions of power may use their authority to stifle younger generations’ efforts to bring about social change or reform. This might involve threats of violence or the actual use of force. Conversely, younger generations may feel frustrated by what they perceive as resistance to much-needed progress.

This can lead to a growing divide between generations – causing generational gaps⁸. These gaps can potentially become fertile ground for age-related distrust, stereotypical thinking, and misunderstandings. In prolongation, this may contribute to eroding social cohesion, thereby instigating or aggravating existing conflicts between family members, co-workers, or groups within society at large. In the most extreme cases, these gaps may serve as a contributing factor to social upheaval and armed conflict in already conflict-sensitive contexts.



What room is there for sincere dialogue when our lives are being threatened by those we should dialogue with?



Intergenerational inheritance of conflict

Armed conflicts, insecurities and violence can “serve to break up families and communities, and cause suspicion and tensions between generations on political ideals and aspirations”⁹. There is a growing body of literature that gives accounts of how one generation’s lived experience of trauma may be passed down to younger generations in ways that could perpetuate, exacerbate, or rekindle conflicts. For instance, unreconciled conflicts between different groups may lead each group’s older generations to pass to younger generations a sense of grievance, superiority, fear, or hatred of the group(s) they fought. As such, they inherit the grievances and hatred as well as the complex dynamics and tensions associated with past conflicts. This perpetuation can create a cycle of revenge, bitterness, or distrust, keeping the conflict intractable and laying the foundation for future conflict, making it difficult to achieve lasting peace¹⁰. Such “inherited” trauma may strongly affect the lives of younger generations in terms of their wants and needs,

as well as the threats they perceive. It may also affect diaspora societies, where old conceptions of conflicts or other major experiences may solidify, as the memories and conceptions of past conflicts can persist and shape the identity and perspectives of these communities. This interconnectedness between generations underscores the idea that history and past conflicts are not isolated events but rather threads woven into the fabric of a society's collective memory.

2. The generational salience of certain societal issues

There are generational dimensions to some of the major obstacles in achieving sustainable, inclusive, and peaceful societies. Most issues contain some generational aspect, but some are more sensitive and conflict-prone than others from a generational perspective, as "intrinsic intergenerational conflict dynamics" may be at play. Issues related to overall political participation and the challenge of climate change are two examples of particularly salient topics from a generational perspective. In the section that follows, we will unpack these two issues from a generational perspective¹¹.



Generational disparity in political representation

Political participation and influence are closely connected to generational (in)equality, and directly impacts the representation of generational interests in politics – including the prioritisation of policies and resource allocation. These priorities and interests can vary between generations. For instance, younger individuals may prioritise access to education and affordable housing. While older individuals may prioritise pensions and safety. Consequently, age and generational identity can shape one's recognition of an issue as a problem and determine its urgency relative to other concerns. This, in turn, shapes perspectives on how to allocate often-limited resources across policy areas, potentially leading to political divisions as each generation advocates for policies aligned with their concerns and values.

In a political system that is inclusive and representative, such generational divisions need not necessarily lead to adverse effects, as they are a natural aspect of any political landscape. However, in a political system that is perceived as unjust and non-representative, or even discriminatory of specific (age) groups, the seeds of societal conflict can be sown in several significant ways. Under certain circumstances, disparities in political influence and representation between generations can become a matter of (in)security.



Decision-making power and the political sphere are 'colonised' and reserved by the older generations.



When generational inequity and age-based political exclusion become institutionalised and systematic, trust in public institutions can erode, which can further frustration and a pessimistic outlook among marginalised age groups. As a result, groups within these generations might disengage from politics, resort to civil disobedience or, willingly or inadvertently, align with groups (some of which are armed) operating outside or in opposition to state institutions to have "their voices heard". The risk of political alienation, or even radicalisation, applies to any marginalised social group. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of seeking violent alternatives to exert political influence is often ascribed to youth, and in particular, young men. While it may be accurate that certain youth groups may be more prone to pursue such alternatives, it is crucial to scrutinise how interactions between such groups of youth and other generational groups can shape their motivations. We must understand the underlying causes (such as systematic exclusion and oppression by state authorities) and the potential influence exerted by groups from older generations in pulling or pushing young individuals into these groups.



The intergenerational crisis of climate change

A different example, interconnected with political influence in some respects, is climate change and environmental degradation. The issue of climate change, given its inherent complexity, gives rise to generational inequality, which fosters an innate sense of combativeness. It is a matter of dividing resources and opportunities between *existing* generations just as much as it is a matter of dividing resources and opportunities between existing and future generations.

As such, inclusive policy development and decision-making "for the future" becomes a key-practice for issues related to climate security. Even so, intergenerational inequity determines policy outcomes given that representatives from older generations tend to hold the agenda-setting and decision-making power. At the same time, members of younger and future generations will live with the consequences of such decisions or the lack thereof. When different generations gather to discuss climate change and other multigenerational challenges, younger generations may feel robbed of their futures, or their children's futures. On the other hand, older generations may believe that younger generations demand they give up too much. After working hard over the course of many years, they feel there is legitimate concern about relinquishing their positions of power to emerging generations who have not yet put in the same labour.

In sum, climate change serves as a compelling illustration of generational inequality, stemming from its complexity and the division of resources and opportunities, not only among existing generations but also between present and future ones. These dynamics can lead to heightened tensions and perceptions of unfairness when different generations engage in discussions on this multifaceted issue.

3. Intergenerational dialogue to unlock lasting solutions

Precisely because the issues mentioned above present challenging generational dynamics, their resolution demands an intergenerational approach. Open communication between generations about the past, present, and future is essential to break conflict dynamics arising from generational differences and gaps, as well as cycles of inherited conflict. To address our most pressing issues to achieve sustainable peace and development, understanding the perspectives of both young and old is essential.

Formal and informal dialogue between generations can be one of several important tools in bridging these gaps. Intergenerational dialogue can challenge stereotypical narratives and counter ageism and age-discriminatory policymaking. In doing so, dialogues can reduce tensions and tendencies of conflict or insecurity in society. Moreover, dialogue across generations can increase the understanding of how challenges affect young and old differently and play a part in finding solutions. Intergenerational solutions can inform future inclusive and representative policy formulation and reduce the risk of short-sighted decision-making. This can, in turn, contribute to resilience and tolerance in societies at large.

Intergenerational dialogue is relevant for a wide range of issues and agendas

Intergenerational dialogue serves diverse purposes beyond the Youth, Peace, and Security agenda. It should be recognised as a vital element of everyday life, beyond a purely political or formal process, as it can foster unity and resilience across societies. The significance of intergenerational dialogue spans numerous issues, areas, and agendas relevant to peace, security, and sustainable development. Therefore, it should be viewed through various lenses.

Intergenerational dialogue in practice

In this section, we will explore considerations and promising practices for hosting meaningful intergenerational dialogues. It is essential to acknowledge that there is no “one golden way” to conduct or partake in an intergenerational dialogue. The meaningfulness, relevance, and conduciveness of such dialogues, which hold the power to make them truly transformative for both younger and older generations, vary depending on the context, the topic of discussion and the unique needs and dynamics among those partaking in the dialogue.

Nevertheless, there are compelling reasons to outline some key considerations and guiding principles for dialogues across generations. This allows practitioners to increase the prospects for meaningful events, while mitigating potential risks. In this section, we outline such considerations and promising practices based on the Dialogue Institute’s emerging experiences. At the end of this section, you will also find a summary of the considerations and promising practices conceptualised as “guiding principles”.

Key considerations and promising practices for intergenerational dialogue

Intergenerational dialogue, like any meaningful exchange, requires a deliberate and inclusive approach that resonates with participants across generational lines. While the inclusion of participants of different ages is a fundamental requirement for a cross-generational dialogue, this is not a guarantee in and of itself that the conversation will be genuinely intergenerational or meaningful for both younger and older participants. Achieving these objectives require the intentional application of a *generational perspective* that permeates all aspects of the dialogue, from considerations regarding the selection and framing of the dialogue topic, to the process design and the pedagogical approach.

Understanding a generational perspective

A generational perspective can be understood according to age-based structures, as a gender perspective is defined along gender dynamics. Applying a generational perspective means to identify age and generation-based differences according to perceptions, values, and priorities etc., and access to power, status, and influence, and to analyse how such potential differences may shape different age groups’ needs, opportunities, and access to rights.

The following section outlines 11 considerations when planning and conducting an intergenerational dialogue with a generational perspective. Underpinning all considerations is the “do-no-harm” approach, employed before, during, and after any intergenerational dialogue event. The relevance and application of these considerations depend on whether you are a participant in an intergenerational dialogue or the event organiser. A set of practical recommendations from an organiser’s and participant’s perspective is connected to each consideration for you, as a reader, to reflect on. The organiser must accommodate these principles and ensure their application before, during, and after the dialogue.

Importance of a “do-no-harm” approach

“Do-no-harm”, in the context of an intergenerational dialogue, is a principle that emphasises the importance of ensuring that actions, decisions, or policies do not negatively impact those participating, regardless of their age or generational identity. The “do-no-harm” principle should guide the organisation and conduct of dialogues to ensure they are constructive, respectful, and safe for all participants.

Key considerations and promising practices

Consideration 1

Incentives and costs related to participation

It is essential that all individuals, regardless of their age or generational identity, comprehend the meaning of their involvement and the potential impact of the dialogue. This necessitates a clear grasp of one's own motivation and the incentives of others, or the possibility that some may not have any.

Participants are typically motivated to engage in a dialogue because they perceive something to gain, something to lose, or a combination of both. When incentives among participants are coherent and aligned, there is a foundation for a mutual and genuine exchange. However, when conflicting incentives exist, the quality of the intergenerational dialogue may be at risk. The effect of conflicting incentives may be misaligned expectations, hindered trust-building, or difficulties finding common ground. This underscores the importance of ensuring that all parties, regardless of generational background, perceive the dialogue as a valuable and equitable exchange.

Furthermore, conflicting incentives may harm the trust in intergenerational dialogues per se. Given that some participants and the groups they represent may have sacrificed resources or taken risks to participate, the dialogue result may be perceived as especially salient. Thus, a negative or inadequate dialogue outcome resulting from a lack of mutual engagement, may cause a loss of confidence in the dialogue practice and the organiser. This may, in turn, erode trust in future dialogues. There is thus a need to acknowledge and address preconditions and existing power imbalances between participating age groups, in addition to aligning participants' incentives and motivations for participating in the dialogue.

Moreover, costs and sacrifices related to participation may be disproportionately felt by certain parties or groups. For instance, while professionals within the international community may organise or attend an intergenerational dialogue as part of their official duties, young leaders engaged in youth organisations on a voluntary basis may have to attend the same dialogue in their free time. In addition to committing their free time, they may have had to take time off work, travel long distances, and make other (financial) sacrifices, which professionals in their official capacity would not have to do.



What to think of as an organiser?

- Strive to co-design, co-plan, co-moderate, and co-create the dialogue with participating parties. A participatory approach can increase and harmonise incentives to partake in the dialogue.
- Clearly articulate potential gains and benefits for all participants, irrespective of generational background. Highlight the unique value each participant brings to the dialogue, emphasising mutual learning and understanding.
- Acknowledge and actively work to mitigate imbalances in resources and commitments that participants may face. Consider offering support in the form of travel stipends or flexible scheduling to ensure that all can attend.
- Take proactive steps to align participant incentives by recognising potential conflicts and working to find common ground. This could involve pre-dialogue consultations, surveys, or facilitated discussions to identify shared goals.
- From a do-no-harm perspective, figure out if any participants face the risk of repercussions for attending and take necessary measures to minimise or mitigate these.



What to think of as a participant?

- Reflect on your personal motivation for participating in the dialogue. Consider what you hope to gain or contribute.
- Be open to co-design, plan, and moderate the dialogue with other participants and organisers and recognise the value of a co-created event.
- Consider the sacrifices other participants may have made to participate in the event. If you find an unwillingness to see issues from your perspective, or to compromise on an issue with other participants, contemplate whether differences in incentives and costs related to participation could be a contributing factor.

Consideration 2

Age-based needs and provisions

Involved parties must have the means and resources to participate in dialogues to the best of their ability. This principle holds especially true in intergenerational settings, where diverse needs and preferences of various generations come into play.

In particular, participating children have distinct needs and requirements, necessitating special attention. These requirements may encompass special provisions for a safe and conducive environment with age-appropriate activities. It may be necessary to arrange for the inclusion of caretakers or mentors who can provide emotional support, help children navigate the dialogue process and facilitate the children's involvement. Moreover, creating engaging and interactive formats tailored to learning styles and attention spans of much younger participants can significantly enhance their engagement and contribution to the dialogue.

On the other end of the spectrum, older participants may require different provisions to ensure active and meaningful participation. This might involve addressing accessibility concerns around the venue, such as wheelchair ramps or elevators, and carefully considered event timing to accommodate potential mobility challenges or preferences. Furthermore, providing assistive devices like hearing aids and employing techniques to amplify and clarify communication channels enable seniors to fully engage in the dialogue.

Age-specific provisions support inclusivity and equal participation, which paves the way for richer and more candid conversations, ultimately leading to more informed and effective outcomes for all involved parties.



What to think of as an organiser?

- Analyse age-specific provisional needs of older and younger participants and prepare to make venues, materials, and resources accessible to all participants, regardless of age or mobility.
- If children participate, pay attention to ensure that you cater for their physical, emotional, and social needs.
- If there are participating older people, pay specific attention to accessibility and mobility concerns.
- Cater for different communication abilities and preferences with various formats like storytelling, visual aids, and group discussions. (Ensure that any technology used is user-friendly and that assistance is available for those who are less familiar with it.)



What to think of as a participant?

- If you face specific challenges or must make sacrifices to attend the dialogue, tell the organisers. This could include requesting accommodation or discussing potential support, such as travel assistance.
- Reflect upon and give voice to your specific needs (age-specific, disability-related etc.) that can facilitate your equal participation during the dialogue.
- Reflect upon what participants representing other generations may need from you in language use etc. to participate on equal terms. Use age-appropriate language and concepts that are easily understood by everyone, including any participating children. Avoid jargon or complex terminology.

Consideration 3

Generational perspectives of the dialogue topic

Organisers and participants must reflect on the dialogue topic from a generational perspective. As an organiser, this should be part of the preparation before the event. Taking time to reflect during the dialogue can also serve as a fruitful exercise to foster exchange and build understanding across generations.

Reflecting on the topic with a “generational lens” includes examining how age-based differences in lived experiences, access to information and decision-making power affects the opinions of various generations on the issue at hand. This process should uncover reasons behind any identified differences in opinion. The exercise may also aid in identifying potential sources of grievances, disagreements and conflict lines between generations, just as cross-generational solutions may be found as a result.



What to think of as an organiser?

- As a preparation step before the event, analyse the dialogue topic from a generational perspective. This includes reflecting on questions such as how age-based differences in lived experiences and opportunities influence 1) the opinions of different generations and 2) their opportunity to impact relevant policymaking. This kind of analysis is paramount when the dialogue topic, like climate change, has inert generational conflict dimensions.
- Try to anticipate potential disagreements by identifying areas where generational differences may lead to friction. Understanding these potential flashpoints allows you to create strategies for constructive dialogue.



What to think of as a participant?

- Reflect upon how your own generational identity and lived experiences have influenced your view and position on the topic to be discussed.
- Reflect, preferably with someone you know and trust who belongs to a younger or older generation than yourself, on how they view the topic before engaging in dialogue with others.

Consideration 4

Code of conduct

An intergenerational dialogue code of conduct should establish the norms, rules, responsibilities and proper practices for participant throughout the event. It forms an instrumental part of the overall “do-no-harm” approach. A clear code of conduct stipulates what the different parties expect and how the process will run its course.

In an intergenerational dialogue setting, it is particularly important that such a code contains agreements between parties on ensuring a safe space for all age groups and generations present. It is, therefore, essential to identify whether participants might perceive the discussion topic or their fellow participants as threatening. The code of conduct should stipulate equal opportunities for young and old to be heard, listened to, and respected. It should also include agreements on non-age discriminatory behaviours and non-stereotyping.



We have once been young ourselves; how did we want to be treated then?



What to think of as an organiser?

- Establish a code of conduct for participants to adhere to throughout the event. Consider co-creating the code of conduct with participants, both young and old, at the start of the event to establish a joint understanding and acceptance.
- Ensure that the code of conduct includes agreements between the parties on how to ensure a safe space, free from discriminatory behaviour and stereotyping, for all age groups and generations. This includes agreeing on rules, which give equal opportunities for participants to speak and be listened to.
- In developing the code of conduct, pay special attention to age-based power dynamics, i.e., who is vocal in suggesting relevant codes. Be mindful that you may need specific dialogues behaviour codes for adults where children and minors are present.
- Designate someone to ensure that participants adhere to the code of conduct and agree on actions if the code is violated.



What to think of as a participant?

- Actively participate in and contribute to creating a code of conduct.
- Reflect upon your own reservations and fears about participating in the dialogue. What would be harmful behaviours or language by younger or older participants?
- During the dialogue, come back to and reflect on the code of conduct several times. Are you still upholding it? Is there more you can do to abide by it?
- If you are an adult and there are children and minors participating in the dialogue – recognise the power dynamics and your responsibility as an adult to create an environment where children and minors feel safe and empowered to express themselves without being dismissed.

Consideration 5

Awareness (about age-based power dynamics)

In intergenerational dialogues, there are many dynamics at play. Some have to do with age-based power dynamics and participants' different generational identities. Others have to do with gender, background, ethnicity etc. These dynamics are always present, irrespective of the event formality. They influence participants' perspectives and points of view on the topic at hand, as well as their perceptions of one another. As such, they affect the extent to which participants believe they have equal opportunities to engage meaningfully in the dialogue.

The recognition and comprehension of how these dynamics play out, together with effective mitigation techniques, lie at the heart of an effective facilitation approach for intergenerational dialogues. Being aware of biases helps prevent misunderstandings or misinterpretations. In particular, it is necessary to scrutinise age-based stereotypes and examine possible prevalent prejudices while, at the same time, acknowledging each generation's distinct experiences, values, and perspectives.

Counteracting age-based biases, contributes to creating an environment where every generation feels valued and included and establishes the basis for productive and meaningful discussions. It also safeguards against disrespectful or offensive comments or behaviours rooted in age-related assumptions, thus fostering a more respectful and inclusive dialogue. It empowers individuals to question their assumptions and seek clarification when needed, ultimately enhancing the quality of the conversation. Consequently, a thorough understanding of age-based power dynamics is vital for promoting a robust and inclusive intergenerational dialogue. This awareness is crucial for both participants in and organisers of these conversations.



It is more important to be aware of the grounds for your own behaviour than to understand the motives of another.

Dag Hammarskjöld



What to think of as an organiser?

- Encourage participants to engage in self-reflection about their generational identity and whether they hold age-based (and other) biases, stereotypes, and prejudices. To counteract biases, emphasise the importance of asking questions rather than making assumptions about others based on age.
- Facilitate discussions, either before or during the dialogue, on how these biases can impact interactions and hinder effective communication.
- Promote exercises that encourage participants to see the issue of discussion from each other's perspective. This may include engaging participants in role-playing scenarios that require responding to different generational perspectives.
- In a respectful way, make participants aware of when they may be acting on age-based stereotypes.



What to think of as a participant?

- Approach the dialogue with an open mind. Be willing to value and learn from the experiences and perspectives of others, regardless of age. Recognise that each generation brings unique insights to the conversation.
- Reflect on what perceptions and views you bring to the dialogue about the generations you are about to meet. Recognise your own biases and stereotypes of others as it helps you to step into the shoes of others and understand their perspectives better.
- Be mindful of your own language and non-verbal cues, ensuring that your interactions are respectful, empathetic, and free from age-related biases.
- In a respectful way, interfere or refer to a moderator or "inbetweener"¹², when participants may act on age-based stereotypes about you and/or others.

Consideration 6

Active listening

Active listening is a crucial skill in all dialogues, including intergenerational ones. However, achieving a state of active listening can be particularly challenging in these settings. Age-based power dynamics and associated biases related to generational identity and age is an obscuring “filter” to the listening act. While there is a normative expectation for children and youth to listen to their elders as a sign of respect, there are also tendencies within younger generations to dismiss their perspectives as outdated. Similarly, it may be difficult for elders to listen intently and open-mindedly to younger generations given said norms. These learned norms persist as we age, making it easy for young and old to default into passive listening roles.

Active listening entails absorbing and reflecting upon what is said and shared. Equally important is to refrain from interrupting. Active listening can be demonstrated through positive body language and engagement in the conversation, such as asking questions. This demonstrates that one is willing to continue to listen. Active listening between generations is essential for acknowledging the past and present and anticipating the future. It allows for addressing grievances of older generations while tending to the concerns and aspirations of younger ones.



We need to listen to learn and not only listen to respond.



Storytelling

Storytelling is a powerful tool that facilitates active listening. Sharing personal stories and experiences can foster trust, empathy, and human connection, which builds participant rapport. Storytelling can be encouraged through directed questions, listening circles, and various reflective methods such as visual aids, text-based reflections, or music.



What to think of as an organiser?

- Address the topic of active listening at the start of the intergenerational dialogue and why there may be obstacles to actively listening to different generations.
- Provide a structured environment that encourages active listening and reflection among participants. This could include different storytelling methods, listening circles where participants alternate between sharing experiences and actively listening to others', feedback exercises in which the listener summarises what they heard, and structured interview sessions where they take turns asking questions and actively listening to responses.
- If children participate in the dialogue, consider adjusting the format and methodologies to cater to children's attention spans.



What to think of as a participant?

- Listen actively to learn, not to respond. Show that you are willing to continue listening by asking questions and avoid interrupting people when they speak.
- Remind yourself to use non-verbal cues like nodding, maintaining eye contact, and displaying open body language. These signals show that you are actively engaged in the conversation.
- Challenge yourself to avoid dismissing statements by much older or younger participants. Ask open-ended questions instead. Try to stay curious as to why you might dismiss something that is being said.

Consideration 7

Human connection

Connecting on a human level in a dialogue means establishing a genuine and meaningful bond with another person based on sharing thoughts and reflections to create mutual understanding. It involves recognising and empathising with the other person's feelings, perspectives, and humanity, regardless of age differences, background, or beliefs. Connecting at a human level goes beyond superficial interactions and engages on a deeper and more personal level. This type of connection creates a foundation for authentic and meaningful conversations as it fosters trust, respect, and a sense of belonging. Connecting on a human level makes participants feel safe enough to step out of their "formal" professional roles or act according to their personality rather than any expected or "assigned" roles.



What we have in common is that all old have been young and that all young will grow older. Let's build on that!



"Connectors", like shared experiences, interests, cultural practices (such as dancing) or music etc. can serve as a glue that binds across generations, forming intergenerational human connection. "Connectors" are what people across generations can relate to and engage with, allowing them to find common ground and build a sense of understanding and connection.

It is important to acknowledge that what constitutes a "connector" in a certain context is culturally and "community" specific. It is, therefore, advisable to discuss what does and does not function as a "connector" with representatives from the dialoguing parties ahead of the event.

While there are likely many more uniting rather than separating factors across generations in any given context, it is easy to focus on the differences between "young" and "old" when engaging in an intergenerational dialogue. Even if there are differences in the perception of an issue or the suggested solutions, this does not negate the similarities that should be highlighted.

For these reasons, it can be useful to initiate dialogues by encouraging participants of diverse generational identities to reflect on their similarities rather than differences. This may involve sharing childhood memories and discussing hopes and fears for the future. By doing so, participants are reminded that everyone has experienced youth and that all will eventually age, fostering empathy and connection across generational lines.



What to think of as an organiser?

- Creating an enabling environment that bridges both physical and generational gaps. This may be through a roundtable seating arrangement (to bridge the physical space) and having the parties share or co-create something as part of the dialogue (such as a meal) to support the human connection through shared traditions and cultural practices.
- Encouraging participants to reflect on their similarities rather than differences, including shared childhood memories and hopes for the future.
- Create opportunities for attendees to connect on the margins of the dialogue, fostering ongoing relationships and building rapport.
- Beyond the dialogue, consider organising cultural or social activities that involve different age groups. Shared experiences can help build intergenerational bonds and understanding.



What to think of as a participant?

- Try to step out of your formal/ official role and express yourself in a more genuine or personal way. This involves expressing yourself in a way that aligns with your thoughts and feelings rather than conforming to external expectations.
- Try to seek common ground and find similarities, such as interests and traditions, between yourself and those of different generational identities.
- Take the opportunity to share a memory from your childhood and reflect on your own future (what are your hopes and fears?). This can foster empathy across generational lines as it reaffirms that all have been young and that all will age.

Music and food as connectors

Music can uniquely transcend generational boundaries and serve as a powerful medium for creating connections. Different generations may have their own preferences, but exploring and sharing music from various eras can lead to meaningful conversations and a deeper understanding of each other's cultural backgrounds. Sharing food is another way to bridge generational gaps. It provides a tangible and sensory experience that can evoke memories, stories, and traditions associated with certain dishes. Cooking or enjoying a meal together can create a relaxed and inclusive atmosphere, encouraging open conversation and a sense of unity.

Consideration 8

Past, present, and future

In an intergenerational dialogue, it is imperative to create opportunities for sharing historical experiences and lessons learned while also actively considering the aspirations of younger and future generations and the implications that present decisions may have. It is a matter of making time and space to “remember the past for the future” and to “remember the future”. This practice entails showing respect and understanding for traditions while embracing change. While it may sound simple, if one has not experienced the past or reckons that they might not be part of the future, this practice may be challenging. However, the practice of “past, present, and future” is crucial, not least when discussing pressing issues like climate change, where generational perspectives play a fundamental role.

Ultimately, it is important to provide opportunities for participants to share their life experiences and knowledge and to value the unique perspectives that each generation brings to the conversation. By weaving together the threads of past wisdom and future aspirations, it is possible to have a more informed and collaborative approach to the challenges that lie ahead. We preserve the past – for the sake of the future.



**We should remember that one day we'll be old.
How will we then look upon and interact with
the young generation?**



What to think of as an organiser?

- Incorporate structured sessions that explicitly focus on exploring the interplay between past experiences, current realities, and future aspirations.
- Allocate dedicated time for older participants to share personal stories and historical accounts, providing younger participants with valuable insights into the past.
- Allocate dedicated time for younger participants to share their hopes, fears, and aspirations for the future.
- Facilitate exercises where participants collectively envision and articulate their hopes, aspirations, and responsibilities for future generations, encouraging forward-thinking discussions.



What to think of as a participant?

- Embrace the idea that past experiences, current actions, and future aspirations are interconnected, and that collective efforts can lead to more informed and collaborative approaches to challenges.
- Approach discussions with respect for traditions and a willingness to absorb the wisdom and knowledge of older generations, recognising the value of their historical experiences, even while advocating for necessary changes or adaptations.
- Acknowledge and value the unique experiences of the younger generations and respect the weight they carry for the future.
- When discussing present decisions, actively contemplate how they may impact future generations, highlighting the importance of responsible decision-making.

Consideration 9

“Inbetweener”

An “inbetweener” is an individual that “guards” and supports the interaction between participants in an intergenerational dialogue, so it remains balanced. As such, an inbetweener plays a crucial role in ensuring unbiased interaction, particularly around age-related perspectives and behaviours. They act as a bridge, connecting the various age groups present in the dialogue. An inbetweener can also, if needed, serve as a mediator or facilitator of parts of the dialogue. An inbetweener is attuned to the unique dynamics between different generations and age groups. Their expertise includes guiding the conversation and addressing issues like language interpretation and any concerns related to generational interactions.

The inbetweener can leverage their age, authority, knowledge of working in intergenerational settings, experience managing age-related power dynamics, or other relevant qualities to discreetly steer interactions. By doing so, the inbetweener helps maintain a fair and respectful conversation, allowing for a more inclusive and productive discussion among participants from different age groups.

One important task of such a facilitator is to intervene when people act on age-based stereotypes and support awareness of the power dynamics in the room. This requires that the inbetweener carries necessary clout and is a credible actor for younger and older participants. If age-related power dynamics are pervasive, both younger and older persons as inbetweeners may be necessary.



What to think of as an organiser?

- Inform participants about the role of the inbetweener as it may not be obvious for those partaking in the dialogue that the “inbetweener” is neutral or that they should regard the person as “a bridge”. Consider having both a young and an older inbetweener. This dual facilitation approach can help address potential power imbalances and stereotypes related to age, ensuring a more inclusive dialogue environment.

When selecting one or several inbetweeners consider the following traits:

- **Ability to facilitate:** The inbetweener should have the skills to guide the conversation, ensuring that all participants have an opportunity to express themselves and that the discussion remains focused and productive.
- **Knowledge of generational dynamics:** Having a solid understanding of generational theory and the historical events that have shaped different generations can be very beneficial.
- **Adaptability:** Being adaptable and flexible in their approach is key. Different generations may have varying communication styles and preferences, and the inbetweener should be able to adjust their approach accordingly.
- **Understanding:** An inbetweener should deeply understand each generation’s perspectives, values, and concerns.



What to think of as a participant?

- Recognise the important role that the inbetweener plays in facilitating the conversation. Understand that they are there to ensure a balanced and fair interaction, particularly concerning age-related perspectives and behaviours. Acknowledge that the inbetweener may need to step in to ensure fairness and inclusivity. Support their efforts to maintain a respectful conversation.
- Take advantage of the inbetweener’s expertise by actively participating in the dialogue. Seek their guidance and insights, especially when navigating generational interactions and addressing concerns.

Consideration 10

Formal versus informal dialogue settings

Intergenerational dialogues can be informal or formal and take place in various settings. They can be casual exchanges between a grandchild and grandparent around a dining table, a thematic discussion between a teacher and a pupil at school, or dialogue as part of a policy process between decision-makers and youth constituents.

A key condition for any successful dialogue is that parties feel a level of comfort with the dialogue environment and interactions. When people are at ease, they are more likely to express their viewpoints, on the one hand, and on the other, to listen attentively, show empathy, and build connections with others.

Real-life conversations between younger and older generations often happen in private or informal settings, such as those between relatives of different ages. These intergenerational dialogues are a natural and organic part of most lives as we grow up. They often provide a safe platform for sharing experiences, exchanging perspectives, and building connections across generations.

On the other side of the spectrum, we have formal dialogue settings. In such settings, people who have never met before engage in dialogue with one another. This can be intimidating, especially for children and younger participants who may not be used to such environments. At the same time, older individuals, particularly those in formal positions of power, may find formality more comfortable as it is easier to predict what is expected and “what happens next”. Formal settings are characterised by their structured nature and associated with established “protocols” and expectations of how participants should behave and interact. Consequently, they often come with a sense of professionalism and hierarchy that can create a greater sense of obligation to maintain formal positions and roles vis-à-vis counterparts to project a certain image or level of competence. Formal dynamics may also reinforce traditional roles and power dynamics based on age, discouraging both young and old from connecting as humans.

Formal set-ups of intergenerational dialogues may also present certain risks. Dialogues between youth and those in positions of power, such as politicians or senior professionals from international organisations, could be used by ill-intended or non-incentivised people with authority to steer, take control of, or even hijack conversations.

Accordingly, intergenerational dialogues, which aim to bring together people of different ages, positions of power and functions for the first time, can benefit from balancing formality and informality. This will help level the playing field, reduce feelings of intimidation, and create a sense of predictability and structure. An “informal formal” approach and set-up for an intergenerational dialogue can increase the chances of open and candid conversations and a rich and diverse exchange of ideas as it helps parties transcend formality and roles assigned by social norms.



What to think of as an organiser?

- In planning for an intergenerational dialogue, recognise that formal settings may be both an advantage and obstacle to the participants, depending on their age, role, and experiences from similar events. On the one hand, older people in professional roles may feel more comfortable having clear “frames” for the discussion. On the other hand, younger people may, for various reasons (often having to do with etiquette), feel unable to truly speak their minds.
- When organising a more formal intergenerational dialogue, reflect on incorporating informal aspects into the dialogue structure and approach.
- Employ strategies to bridge physical and social gaps between generations. For instance, consider using seating arrangements that facilitate interaction, rapport building exercises or “social” activities related to music, art, or culture.



What to think of as a participant?

- Recognise that formal settings may influence how people speak and act. Through your own behaviour and language use, contribute to an atmosphere where both young and old feel comfortable.
- Use inclusive, understandable language, avoiding jargon or slang as well as technical terms and abbreviations that may be unfamiliar to some generations.
- Seek opportunities for intergenerational dialogue across formal and informal fora. Practice in everyday life, and it will become easier to enter a space dedicated to intergenerational dialogue.
- Keep an open mind and prepare to accept that different generations may perceive codes and etiquette differently.

Consideration 11

Dialogue process versus one-off events

As noted above, there will be differences in power, experiences, perceptions, and willingness to engage in dialogue between different generations. Bridging these differences and building trust takes time. Exactly how long this takes may be impossible to predict. One-off events, therefore, while well-intentioned, may turn out to be unfruitful. This is most likely when bringing people together who have never met or have met only in settings where they have engaged as antagonists or competitors. Where age-based power differences are strongly pronounced in the challenges, the intergenerational dialogue will benefit from continuous dialogue where people get to know each other and build trust over time as they converse about various topics.

Sometimes, continuous dialogue may not be possible or feasible, and a one-off event is nevertheless worthwhile. In such cases, it is important to examine the one-off event from a do-no-harm perspective and recognise the risks involved. For example, unless carefully planned and facilitated, such events may increase rather than reduce frustration and tension between different age groups. One-off events run the risk of merely scratching the surface of deeper issues and mainly serve to focus on problem identification rather than comprehensive and effective problem-solving in the intergenerational context.



What to think of as an organiser?

- Prioritise dialogue processes rather than one-off events to give participants time to build trust so that age-based stereotypes and prejudices are dismantled, and intergenerational ties strengthened.
- If organising a one-off event, consider “post-dialogue follow-up” meeting or discussion to gather input from attendees after the event to continuously improve the intergenerational dialogue experience. This is essential if age-discriminatory practices were observed during the main dialogue. In such cases, organise separate meetings with the younger and older participants to provide a safe, confidential space to debrief and learn. This additional step can help to address any concerns, foster understanding, and promote a more inclusive environment for future dialogues.



What to think of as a participant?

- Set reasonable expectations for the intergenerational dialogue, especially if attending a one-off event. Recognise that you may progress much further if engaging in an ongoing dialogue process.
- Seek opportunities to engage with younger and older participants beyond the dialogue, fostering ongoing connections and understanding.

Case Study

A multistakeholder intergenerational dialogue



Photo by Yousef G. Bisher

Introduction

As part of our knowledge-generating process on intergenerational dialogue, we, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the MENA-region (SDI), arranged a multistakeholder intergenerational dialogue event. The purpose was to test emerging theories in practice and contribute to deepened exchanges and relationship building between young leaders of the YPS MENA coalition on the one hand, and policy- and decision-makers working on issues related to youth inclusion, peace, security, and development in the MENA-region, on the other.

The dialogue gathered more than 50 people of diverse generational identities, genders and backgrounds from the MENA-region and the EU. Participants represented youth-led networks and organisations, civil society organisations, the United Nations, the European Union, the Jordanian Ministry of Youth, and the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and related government agencies. Accordingly, participants varied in age, stakeholdership, role, and position. Some held high-level positions, while others represented the technical or grassroots level.

In this case study, we share some steps we took to ensure positive outcomes at one of the larger intergenerational dialogues we conducted as part of the guidance note development. We will also highlight some key lessons learned and give examples of what we could have done differently to improve the event outcome.

1. Ahead of the dialogue

Careful selection of participants

A group of participants diversely represented across various dimensions, such as age, gender, backgrounds, and professional roles, had been identified as an essential prerequisite for a meaningful intergenerational dialogue. Selecting the right participants for our dialogue event was thus critical. We approached this task with great care, aiming to create diversity, but also ensure dimensions of commonality, such as the country contexts they lived and or operated in. We also wanted to engage with people with whom we had engaged before. While we knew some people would be “friends” of the matter, we also engaged new people with whom we had no prior engagement. In this way, we facilitated new interactions between people and introduced more people to our approach to intergenerational dialogue.

Pre-dialogues in smaller, informal settings

To lay a solid foundation for the dialogue and to prepare ourselves we arranged a couple of pre-dialogues in smaller, informal settings ahead of the larger dialogue event. These dialogues served a dual purpose: firstly, they provided a platform to test our chosen pedagogical approach in a small-scale setting (e.g., around one dining table), allowing us to refine the approach based on practical and pedagogical insights.

Secondly, they offered us the opportunity to introduce some of the participants who were to attend the larger event, so that they could become acquainted with one another as well as with our approach to intergenerational dialogues. These smaller roundtable dialogue dinners also supported us in testing the role and function of an “inbetweeners”. This initial interaction and “practice” round set the stage for more open and productive conversations during the formal dialogue.

Preparation meetings and sessions with key stakeholders

A careful preparation to address participants’ incentives and expectations was another practice identified as crucial. Hence, we held preparatory meetings with some of the key stakeholders. This included hosting a preparation session with the youth representatives who were invited to familiarise themselves with the event’s purpose, structure, and participants. Additionally, preparatory meetings and briefs were convened with selected high-level participants (such as ministers and UN representatives). These meetings served to ensure alignment between their expectations and the dialogue’s goals and pedagogical approach so that they were comfortable in the planned “informal formal” set-up.

2. During the dialogue

An “informal formal” set-up

Given the diversity of attendees, the structure of the event was deliberately designed to strike a balance between formality and informality. This entailed various considerations about the venue, logistical arrangement, and the dialogue structure. At the heart of our set-up was a desire to create a “homey” ambiance for the event and that of a “family dinner” for the actual dialogues. Regarding the venue, we consequently decided to host the dialogue in the Director’s residence garden. This allowed space for both informal interactions and a dinner-style roundtable setting for the actual dialogues.

The event commenced with a non-facilitated networking session, allowing participants to get acquainted. The initial networking session was followed by a formal “opening” of the event, which included a welcome note by the Director and the expected “code of conduct” for the roundtable dialogues. The opening also contained key notes from representatives from some of the stakeholder groups, including the youth network, the Ministries, and the UN, in which they reflected on the role of intergenerational dialogue in the MENA region from their perspectives. These keynotes helped frame the conversations and provided some food for thought.

Facilitated roundtable dialogues

Following the event opening, participants were invited to take their seats for the dialogue. Seating arrangements had been carefully designed prior to the event, to ensure a diverse representation of age, “seniority”, gender, background, and professional role at each table of ten. At the same time, efforts were made to connect people who, for instance, shared experiences from the same context.

Inbetweeners and rapporteurs

Each table received guiding questions to get their conversation started. Moreover, we had designated an “inbetweeners” at each table who moderated, supported, and attempted to safeguard the conversation and the interplay from stereotypical arguments and, if needed, challenge-biased behaviours. In addition, each table had a pre-selected rapporteur, who documented the conversation, reporting back in plenary on key takeaways at the end of the event. In this case, we invited the youth group to nominate young persons as rapporteurs to support the “inbetweeners”. Recognising that such a role could make it more difficult for them to partake actively in the dialogue, measures were taken to ensure that the rapporteurs were given space in the dialogue. For example, they were invited to kick-start the roundtable dialogues by reflecting on the guiding questions given to each table.

3. Follow-up to the dialogue

Individual follow-up conversations

Following the dialogue, the designated inbetweeners took proactive steps to engage in focused follow-up conversations with selected participants. This approach provided valuable insights for us as it ensured the recognition of participant perspectives on and perceptions of the dialogue. It provided an opportunity for personal feedback. Regrettably, in certain instances, non-conductive behaviours of some (mainly older) participants had been observed by inbetweeners, along with the use of master suppression techniques, particularly directed towards younger attendees.

By discreetly yet directly confronting these issues, we sought to underscore the Institute's unwavering commitment to a dialogue space that champions inclusivity, equality, and mutual respect across generations. Through these targeted conversations, we learnt valuable lessons from the experience and, hopefully, we also contributed to positive changes for future intergenerational dialogues as participants had been made aware of their unconscious biases and behaviours.

Youth debriefing session

We also conducted a targeted debriefing session with the youth representatives who had participated in the dialogue. The debriefing session provided a safe space for younger participants to voice their reactions and concerns with the behaviour of some of the older participants. It also provided a space to jointly reflect on possible practices and actions that could prevent and counteract such situations or behaviours by the inbetweeners or themselves. The importance of agreeing on a code of conduct as part of the dialogue was highlighted.

Internal evaluation and lessons-learnt workshop

Based on participant input, we undertook an internal lessons-learnt workshop dedicated to assessing the successes and pinpointing areas that warranted improvement for forthcoming intergenerational dialogues. This reflective exercise yielded several key insights, including:

- *A meticulous selection and in-depth preparation process of inbetweeners:* Implementing a more meticulous and rigorous process for selecting and preparing inbetweeners was deemed essential. This would ensure they possessed the necessary influence and skills to intervene effectively when non-conductive behaviour or language arose among participants.
- *Utilising more "connectors":* Integrating other engaging elements, such as music and arts during the networking, could have enhanced participant engagement further and initiated genuine human connectors prior to the roundtable dialogues.
- *Post-dialogue mingle session:* Enabling yet another mingle/networking session after the roundtable dialogues would have allowed participants to exchange reflections and cultivate relationships across tables, ultimately enriching the overall intergenerational dialogue experience.
- *The roundtable dinner setting:* On a positive note, hosting the dialogue in a roundtable dinner setting was emphasised as particularly appreciated by the participants. This set-up was perceived to have facilitated a more conducive environment and allowed candid conversations with less "positioning" between the parties. In particular, sharing a meal together during the dialogue was mentioned by many stakeholder representatives as very conducive.

Follow-up dialogues in informal settings

As part of the follow-up, we have continued to arrange several smaller roundtable dialogues to follow up on specific questions and issues raised during the dialogue. These follow-up dialogues have also kept people connected and afforded an opportunity to introduce new people, who had not been part of previous dialogues, to the process.

Guiding principles

Guiding principles

Below follows a set of guiding principles¹³. It summarises the considerations and promising practices discussed above. The principles provide a basic framework for inspiration and reflection that can be used as a starting point when organising and/or partaking in a dialogue that is intergenerational.



Consider your own and other parties' incentives (or lack thereof) to meaningfully engage in an intergenerational dialogue. Reflect on potential age-based differences and how that may affect participants' expectations on the conversations and its outcomes and the quality of the interaction per se. Explore how to bridge those gaps, preferably prior to the actual dialogue.



Give voice to and make age-specific provisions to ensure that the needs of younger and older participants (such as hearing aids for older people and child-friendly seating arrangement and language) are acknowledged and addressed. Always contemplate potential risks that some age groups may face and adhere to a sound do-no-harm approach to safeguard the well-being and dignity of individuals across all age groups and generational identities (with specific focus on children if they are partaking in the dialogue)



Analyse the dialogue topic from a generational perspective while keeping intersectionality in mind. This includes looking at two things: 1) the nature of the topic and whether it is salient or sensitive from a generational perspective (and if so, try to understand why and how), and 2) how generational identities may influence people's views on the topic, as well as how potential challenges and conflicts related to the topic should be solved.



Establish a code of conduct with "principles", "rules", and "responsibilities" that specifically stipulate how equal opportunities (e.g. talking time) can be ensured for representatives of younger and older generations throughout the dialogue and how a safe space, free from ageism¹⁴, can be achieved, what measures will be enforced, and by whom, if the code is broken.



Become aware of and challenge your own and others' potential age-based biases and prejudices by reflecting on stereotypes about different generations. Avoid making assumptions based solely on age, and champion inclusive and respectful dialogue that values the contributions of all generations. This includes recognising that each generation brings unique experiences, values, and perspectives to the table.



Encourage and engage in active listening. This entails absorbing what is said and shared and reflecting, through positive body language, that one is paying attention and, through posing questions, that one is willing to continue to listen. Mutual listening may be particularly challenging in an intergenerational setting due to well-established age-based norms surrounding what constitutes respectful behaviours. Active listening can be promoted by using storytelling methods.



Support and seek human connection between parties to foster an open and honest conversation. Connecting at a human level involves building trust by recognising and empathising with other people's feelings, perspectives, and humanity, regardless of differences in age and generational identity. This can be encouraged through exercises in which participants reflect around generational similarities (such as common values, emotions, and experiences) or through sharing or co-creating something (e.g., a meal) that alludes to joint traditions and cultural practices.



Make time and space to "remember the past for the present and the future" and to "remember the future". In an intergenerational dialogue, this entails creating opportunities for sharing cultural origins, historical experiences and lessons learned. Simultaneously consider the aspirations, priorities, and potential implications of present decisions – whether current or pending – on younger and future generations. This practice is crucial when discussing pressing issues like climate change, where generational perspectives play a significant role.



Make use of inbetweeners to guard the interaction and/or moderate conversations between participants so that it remains balanced, unbiased, and free from age-based prejudices and master suppression techniques. Inbetweeners can leverage their age, authority, lived experience and relationships with the participants to serve as a bridge or connector between the different generations represented in the dialogue. The role of inbetweeners may be extra relevant when the topic of the dialogue is more salient from a generational perspective.



Strive towards creating an "informal formal" setting and environment for the dialogue. This entails striking a balance between formality and informality, ultimately fostering inclusivity and rapport among participants. Formal settings, while potentially comfortable for older individuals or those in positions of power, can be intimidating for younger participants and children, who may be less accustomed to such environments. Moreover, informal settings may help put participants at ease, allowing them to move beyond the formal age-related roles often dictated by societal norms.



Engage in ongoing dialogues with people of different generational identities. A recurring engagement allows for the dismantling of age-based stereotypes, improved acceptance of differences, and the establishment of trust. As an organiser, this entails prioritising intergenerational dialogue processes rather than *one-off* events.

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Your devotion to bridging intergenerational gaps remains crucial in advancing peace, security, and development.

About the Swedish Dialogue Institute for Middle East and North Africa

The Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa¹⁵ is a governmental agency under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It serves as a platform for contacts and dialogue between, on the one hand, Sweden and the countries of Europe, and on the other, the countries of the Middle East and North Africa. The Institute has a regional mandate to address issues important for political, economic, and social development in the region, or for relations between the countries in the region and the rest of the world, or that help increase mutual understanding in the areas of culture and religion. The activities of the Institute also contribute to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in its various aspects.

The Dialogue Institute is based in Amman, Jordan.

About the Folke Bernadotte Academy

The Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA)¹⁶ is the Swedish government agency for peace, security and development.

FBA supports international peace operations and international development cooperation. The agency conducts training, research and method development in order to strengthen peacebuilding and statebuilding in conflict and post-conflict countries. We also recruit civilian personnel and expertise for peace operations and election observation missions led by the EU, UN and OSCE. The agency is named after Count Folke Bernadotte, the first UN mediator.

Endnotes

¹ The aspiration of this guidance note is not to be a prescriptive or fully fledged tool or a step-by-step handbook for how to plan, execute and follow-up on an intergenerational dialogue. Nor does it aspire to serve as a facilitator's guide.

² Note that these dialogues did not include children.

³ Therefore, conceptualisation and analysis of generations should steer clear of precise definitions and labels as this is an inherently imprecise practice.

⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2015/09/03/the-whys-and-hows-of-generations-research/>

⁵ There may be norms at play which stipulate that older generations are entitled to more decision-making power, as younger generations will reach this stage eventually, and be allowed the same privileges.

⁶ This description serves as an explanatory reference point, guiding actors in understanding what intergenerational dialogue should strive towards being. It may not be a universally applicable or prescriptive definition of intergenerational dialogue.

⁷ Without any claims of exhaustiveness or definitiveness.

⁸ Generational gaps can manifest emotionally, physically (through e.g., urbanisation of younger populations), or in terms of opportunities.

⁹ "Dialogue and Mutual Understanding Across Generations", Doha International Institute & the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Division for Social Policy and Development, 2011. <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/family/docs/egm11/reportdoha2011.pdf>

¹⁰ Bar-Tal, D. (2013). Intractable Conflicts: Socio-Psychological Foundations and Dynamics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹¹ Beyond these two examples, there are issues that may not inherently be conflict-prone yet have an intergenerational dimension at their core. These include areas like artificial intelligence, for example, and merit an intergenerational approach for comprehensive understanding and forward-looking solutions and ethical considerations.

¹² See consideration number 9 for explanation.

¹³ This is not an exhaustive step-by-step checklist, and it is necessary to note that ensuring a good dialogue across generations may take more than adhering to these principles alone. As such, the order in which to consider or adhere to the principles may also differ depending on the nature of the specific dialogue.

¹⁴ Ageism refers here to the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) towards others or oneself based on age. Ageism is commonly understood as negative attitudes and actions against elderly people. While there are specific challenges of elderly, stereotypes, discrimination and prejudice based on age affects both older and younger generations. As such, ageism as a concept should be understood as applicable to all ages.

¹⁵ <https://www.swedenabroad.se/en/embassies/dialogue-institute/>

¹⁶ <https://fba.se/en/>

Intergenerational dialogue is a two- or multiway communication method grounded in active listening and mutual learning practices between members of different generations, which is meaningful for all parties.

The overarching objective of an intergenerational dialogue includes seeking mutual understanding of generational perspectives and differences, breaking stereotypes and discrimination structures based on age, building trust and empathy across generations, and bridging potential gaps and inequalities between generations.

Intergenerational dialogue can also aim to explore solutions to jointly experienced challenges, problems and/or conflicts and, if feasible and desirable, result in the identification or agreement of (collective) action that benefits both older and younger generations respectively.

